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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA RAISING ITS REGIONAL PROFILE, STARTING WITH MEXICO

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Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer.

Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) High-level meetings between Colombian and Mexican officials in recent months highlight the GOC's growing willingness to take on a leadership role in the region in combating terrorism, narcotics and other criminal activity. The two countries are working more closely than ever to fight narcotraffickers, and Colombia is helping Mexico counter Venezuelan influence in Central America and the Caribbean. Still, Colombia remains worried over corruption in Mexico and a lack of institutionalization in the bilateral relationship.
End summary.

RECENT MEETINGS POINT TO BOLSTERED COLLABORATION

12. (U) President Uribe and Mexican President Felipe Calderon, along with Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom and Panamanian President Martin Torrijos, met in mid-January to highlight the need for the four countries to present a united front against narcotrafficking and organized crime. At the meeting, Calderon asked Uribe for advice based on the successes of the GOC's Democratic Security policy. Uribe emphasized Colombia's use of civilian informants, rewards, and military counterintelligence against narco-terrorists. Calderon first reached out to learn from Colombia's experience in fighting narcotrafficking when he visited Bogota as president-elect in late 2006

13. (U) In November 2008, Uribe and Calderon announced that they would step up bilateral anti-narcotics cooperation. In a joint press statement issued after the two met in private in Mexico City, Uribe praised the GOM's efforts and noted that Calderon's personal commitment to combating drugs made Mexico a "great" Colombian ally. Senior officials from both countries--including Colombian Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos, Colombian Prosecutor General Mario Iguaran, and Mexican Attorney General Eduardo Medina Mora--simultaneously held the third in a series of high-level bilateral meetings

aimed at bolstering cooperation on drug trafficking, smuggling, money laundering, and other criminal activities. Medina Mora told the press that the three countries discussed specific projects for joint cooperation in 2009-10.

¶4. (C) Colombia and Mexico are also promoting trilateral cooperation with the United States in fighting drugs. Santos, Medina Mora, and Drug Enforcement Administration Andean Regional Director Jay Bergman met in Bogota on October 29 for the fourth in a series of tripartite meetings aimed at boosting cooperation on security and counternarcotics. At the October meeting, Colombia and Mexico agreed on a list of high-value targets designated as "key narcotics facilitators" who interact between Mexican and Colombian drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). Officials emphasized that these were not household names, but rather the crucial interlocutors and trusted emissaries who enable the Mexico-Colombia pipeline to operate. The sides also agreed to maintain their ongoing cooperation on wiretaps involving each others' nationals. DEA reports that these achievements reflect a commitment to cooperation that did not exist until recently.

FUTURE IS UNCERTAIN

¶5. (C) These and other meetings have sought to build on Colombia's growing willingness to assume a leadership role in the region. Colombia is helping Mexico confront the narcotrafficking-fuelled violence that plagued Colombia in the past by training Mexican police, boosting cooperation with Mexican anti-narcotics officials, and sharing best practices to help Mexico tackle its spiraling kidnapping problem.

¶6. (C) Monica Gonzalez, political officer at the Mexican Embassy in Bogota, told us in late January that the GOM welcomes Colombia's assistance, but cautioned against a "cookie cutter" approach to implementation of Colombia's experience in Mexico due to significant institutional and cultural differences between the two countries. Gonzalez added that this was not a problem yet, but cautioned that all sides were aware of the issue as GOC-GOM cooperation deepens under Plan Merida.

¶7. (C) Beyond security, Colombia has sought to deepen its ties with Mexico through the Colombia-Mexico Free Trade Agreement and by helping Mexico revive Plan Puebla-Panama, which seeks to bolster Central American development. Colombian MFA officials Alicia Alfaro and German Castaneda told us Colombia and Mexico see this as a way to counter Venezuelan influence in Central America and the Caribbean by offering alternative energy assistance through the construction of small-scale biodiesel plants, among other projects.

GOC CONCERNS OVER CORRUPTION

¶8. (C) Still, GOC officials remain worried about Mexican corruption and a lack of institutionalization. Alfaro and Castaneda told us the GOC was "frustrated" by the slow pace of Mexico's security reform measures (Colombia has been working closely with Mexico on the reforms), and was concerned by Mexico's high levels of corruption. Colombian MFA officials confirmed that Colombian National Police Commander General Oscar Naranjo told Mexican Public Security Secretary Garcia Luna that Colombia would look to cut training programs if Mexico was not able to show better vetting of its security and police officials that receive Colombian training. Officials cited the November 18th arrest of senior Mexican police official Ricardo Gutierrez Vargas, head of Interpol's Mexico City bureau, as particularly worrying because GOC officials had shared sensitive information with him.

¶9. (C) Beyond the interest in disrupting the Colombia-Mexico narcotrafficking nexus, much of the impetus for the recent

improvement in cooperation stems from the strong personal dynamic between Uribe and Calderon--and between Santos and Medina Mora. Alfaro and Casteneda said an important next step would be to construct durable institutional mechanisms--such as permanent coordination at the working level--that will survive beyond Uribe and Calderon. Neither country has taken significant steps to start such a process. The Mexican Embassy's Gonzalez said it is likely that the governments will begin to build more durable cooperation mechanisms, since they expect bilateral ties to deepen in the near future.

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